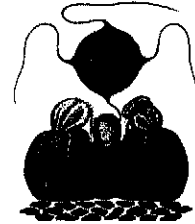


15

Male and Female Roles & Responsibilities

"Women must not be excluded from any decisions made for the future of our children."

"Ts'ékwi beyatié hultá ho?á hél begħanáyati nrt'a ho?á yanatthé nuheskéné béba."

Dene Elder Rosalie Tsannie - Hatchet Lake First Nation.¹⁰⁴

The roles and responsibilities of men and women were clearly defined in traditional First Nations' societies. These roles were based on respect, integrity and value for each other. The First Nations' law of balance and harmony is reflected in all of Creation. When there is imbalance in life, the result is dysfunction in families, communities and in the larger society. This also leads to the erosion and loss of First Nations' identity and language.

From early childhood, a First Nations' person learns to listen to the Elders, and eventually listening becomes an acquired skill.¹⁰⁵ First Nations' teachings hold that children are a gift to be brought up to adulthood for the Creator. The very beautiful Lakota word for children is *wakanheja*,¹⁰⁶ which means 'sacred ones'.¹⁰⁷ The *nēhiyaw* term for child is *awasis*, which is derived from *awasisit* meaning 'glowing'. 'Glowing' has many interpretations; however, it is understood that when it applies to children this means the children are clean spiritually, mentally and physically.

Role of Men

Historically, the primary role of First Nations' men is to give support, provide for the home and protect the community. Fulfilling this role requires respect for the home and community. This respect engendered in First Nations' men a caring for their female relatives that precluded violent or harsh ways. Traditionally, First Nations' men play an active role in raising children. The men of First Nations' communities would be responsible for the instruction of the boys and young men when they reached the approximate age of twelve. This instruction focused on hunting skills, leadership training and warfare. In contemporary times, men might focus on teaching

¹⁰⁴ Supra at 29, November 5, 2009

¹⁰⁵ Michael Asch, *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada, Essays on Law, Equality, and Respect for Difference*, UBC Press 1997 pp. 174

¹⁰⁶ Supra at 64, pp. 40

¹⁰⁷ Supra at 64, pp. 40

boys and young men cultural skills like singing, drumming and Pow wow dancing and teaching their children employment skills that would enhance their communities.

First Nations' men were an important part of the traditional governance structure. Often men inherited their leadership roles through their fathers and their grandfathers before them. First Nations' men were primarily warriors and hunters. As well, men were gifted with sacred knowledge passed from generation to generation to guide them as they lead their people. They knew the land well, where to take the people for wintering grounds and locations that had the best medicinal plants and resources. For First Nations to be successful, the men had to be skilled hunters and guides.

Another essential role of First Nations' men is as helpers at ceremonies and with Elders. The tasks of helpers include distributing food at feasts and ceremonies, seating the guests, conducting smudges, filling the Elders' pipes and tending fires. In the warrior's lodge, the helpers were appointed on a permanent basis. For ceremonies, gatherings and events, the host chooses the helpers for the occasion. It is required that hosts use the appropriate protocol to access the assistance of helpers. Generally, the helpers are chosen for their knowledge of the laws and protocols that must be followed in each of these ceremonies. It is considered an honour to be a helper.

Role of Women

Historically, First Nations' women had highly respected roles in all aspects of society. Women were advisors, mentors, and leaders involved at all levels of governance. Through intergenerational transfer, First Nations' women inherited important leadership and ceremonial roles, gifts and responsibilities.

In the past and today, women have also been gifted with pipes. The protocols and practices associated with these pipes will vary from First Nation to First Nation. In general, women continue to play a major and essential role in all our ceremonies and gatherings. First Nations' worldview teaches that most ceremonies are equally 'held' by men and women. Unlike the historic approaches of colonization and assimilation, women are equal members of First Nations' societies.

Some First Nations' societies were matrilineal and the family line, names, dances, songs and so forth were passed on through the women. First Nations' women were teachers, the givers of life and contributed to the training and selection of the leaders of their community. Women were much more than nurturers; their roles were endless and varied from community to community.

This respect for women is evident in the languages of First Nations. The word 'fire' in Nakawē is defined as a "woman's heart."¹⁰⁸ They say the love of a woman is so great, so powerful that it caused creation to take place. And because her love is so powerful, when she withdraws it, destruction can occur.¹⁰⁹

The nēhiyaw women had specific roles that included teaching and maintaining the laws, principles and customs of their people. The women who were chosen for these roles were called *okicitaw iskwewak*.¹¹⁰ These women were the law keepers. Their approach to law keeping was to restore order and balance as opposed to taking punitive action. The *okicitaw iskwewak* would seek guidance and consensus from other members of the community. No decision was done in malice or in vindictiveness. The *okicitaw iskwewak* were respected teachers and law keepers because of their profound knowledge and sacred teachings.

Historically among First Nations, the traditional and cultural ceremonies provided the place to make lawful decisions and a place to teach the laws. The Indian Act outlawed and prohibited the use of ceremonies, which effectively illegalized the traditional 'education' system of the *okicitaw iskwewak*. As well, the churches and missionaries worked to undermine the *okicitaw iskwewak*.

The traditional First Nations' governance systems were based on a balanced participation of men and women in the maintenance of peace, order and law. This principle of balance is inherent in our First Nations' laws of governance. The society of the *okicitaw iskwewak* is not readily visible in most First Nations' communities today. Like many other societies and ceremonies, it was practiced in isolation despite the efforts of governments and churches to destroy the power and authority of First Nations' women.¹¹¹ Fortunately, the *okicitaw iskwewak* society still exists today.

108 Supra at 78, pp. 36

109 Supra at 78, pp. 36

110 Supra at 51

111 Supra at 4, Vol. 4 - Ch. 2 Perspective of Women